

The Augsburg Confession

Article 26

Church Customs

This article goes into more detail on the Church customs and traditions spoken of generally in Article XV. There the Lutheran confessors stated that church customs established by men were only useful if they were “*observed without sin*” and if they “*contribute to peace and good order in the church*”. In addition they stated that in their churches they instructed the people concerning these practices so that they would “*not be burdened with the notion that such things are necessary for salvation*”. Although Article XV is very general in nature, several specific customs are mentioned there which are taken up in separate articles: “*Accordingly monastic vows and other traditions concerning the distinction of foods, days, etc., by which it is intended to earn grace and make satisfaction for sin, are useless and contrary to the Gospel.*” The distinction of foods is taken up thoroughly here in Article XXVI and monastic vows will be discussed in depth in Article XXVII.

Article XXVI

Again, this is one of the longest articles in the Augsburg Confession (only Articles XXVII and XXVIII are longer), so we will not reprint it here in its entirety. The following is a summary of the contents of the article.

Lines 1-3: Introduction. Man-made customs and regulations were created and it was taught that observing them was a means of earning God’s grace and making satisfaction for sins, resulting in many errors in the church. The Roman Confutation defended such man-made legal regulations of the Roman Church, saying: “*We know from the apostle that all power is of God, and especially that ecclesiastical power has been given by God for edification: for this reason, from the Christian and devout heart of the holy Church the constitutions of the same holy, catholic and apostolic Church should be received as are useful to the Church, as well for promoting divine worship as for restraining the lust of the flesh, while they enable us more readily to keep the divine commands.*” (The issue concerning the power of the Roman Church will be addressed thoroughly in Article XXVIII - Of Ecclesiastical Power.)

Lines 4-7: Problem #1. Such teaching obscures the grace of God in Christ and faith in Him. We do not become good in God's sight by our works, but this has been extinguished by those who teach that grace is earned by prescribed fasts, distinction of foods, etc.

Lines 8-11: Problem #2. Such teaching obscures the commands of God. It is taught that the Christian life is judged, not by the laws of God, but by the laws of men which are elevated and emphasized above the commands of God.

Lines 12-17: Problem #3. Such teaching burdens consciences. The keeping of these customs is made all-important and the Gospel of Christ is not mentioned at all, confusing people and keeping people from growing in a knowledge of Christ. This became a burden on the consciences of people because the Roman Church made it a legal regulation that must be followed.

Lines 18-20: Instruction. The Lutheran churches point out these errors and instruct their people concerning faith and God's grace.

Lines 21-29: Scriptural support for not being able to earn God's grace through our works. *"It is diametrically opposed to the Gospel to institute or practice such works for the purpose of earning forgiveness of sin or with the notion that nobody is a Christian unless he performs such services"* (§ 29).

Lines 30-32: True suffering. The Lutheran churches teach that Christians will and must suffer, but they do not need to abuse themselves in order to cleanse themselves of sin - since that cannot be accomplished.

Lines 33-39: Self-conduct. There are great advantages to fasting and other forms of bodily discipline - keeping the body from sin and conditioning the body for one's specific duties, but this must not be forced, but chosen by the individual. In addition it must be understood that it does not merit God's grace.

Lines 40-45: Order in the Church. The Lutherans retained many customs and traditions which served to keep order in the church, but instructed the people of their correct and incorrect use. Historical examples are given.

Abused Customs

Before we discuss the thought and purpose of this article, it will be helpful to mention the customs which are referred to in this article. The Lutherans specifically mention: distinction of foods (§ 1,6,39), prescribed fasts (§ 2,6,9,33,39), prayers (§ 9), vestments or dress (§ 6,9), and mortification (§ 30,37).

Distinction of foods - This refers to the practice in the Roman Church of not allowing the eating of certain kinds of meat on certain festival days. The reason this is mentioned is because the Romans had made fasting simply a change in food (e.g. Fish on Friday's) rather than a complete fast. "A fast day is a day on which only one full meal is allowed, but in the morning and evening some food may be taken, the quantity and quality of which are determined by approved local custom" (The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism, p. 135).

Prescribed Fasts - These words refer to the practice of making fasts on certain days mandatory for all its members. This is one of six main commandments of the Roman Catholic Church and is obligatory for all members of the Church on certain holy days. "You shall observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church" (Catechism of the Catholic Church p. 549). While fasting is mentioned often in both the Old and New Testaments, it is not as a means of atoning for sin, but as a sign of repentance (e.g. Jonah 3:7), often in times of trial or distress to dedicate time to turn to God in prayer (e.g. 2 Samuel 12:16).

Prayers - This refers to prayers made in a certain way, which make them more beneficial than other prayers. The Roman Church prescribed prayer as an act of penance which "contributes to the forgiveness of our sins" (Catechism of the Catholic Church p. 401). While prayer is a wonderful blessing from God, we must recognize that prayer is not a means of grace and does not impart forgiveness of sins.

Vestments - This is a term that refers to the clothing worn by priests, bishops, and others in the Catholic Church. Once again we are reminded that these customs are

man-made and, while beneficial in some ways, should not be considered in any way meritorious of God's grace.

Mortification - This word (which means "putting to death") is used to refer to practices common in the Roman church which range from giving up or abstaining from certain pleasures (e.g. meat during Lent); to living a simple or impoverished life (e.g. monastic life); to even inflicting pain on oneself (e.g. corporal mortification).

Regarding all of these customs the Lutheran confessors stated: *"It is therefore taught that grace cannot be earned, God cannot be reconciled, and sin cannot be atoned for by observing the said human traditions. Accordingly they should not be made into a necessary service of God"* (§ 21).

Conclusion

This article highlights one of the main points of dispute between Catholics and Lutherans, namely, the exaltation of the will of the Church above the Word of God. Concerning this Jesus said: ***"And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men"*** (Matthew 15:9).

Throughout this article the Lutherans state the necessity of holding to the Scriptural doctrine of forgiveness of sin by grace, through faith, and not by works. By teaching that certain actions or customs merit God's grace the Roman Church has led many away from the all-sufficient work of Christ as Savior, and instead to have false trust in the Church's man-made rules and regulations.